Documents

Considering the Evidence: The Aztecs and the Incas through Spanish Eyes

During the fifteenth century, the Western Hemisphere hosted human communities of many kinds—gathering and hunting peoples, agricultural village societies, chiefdoms, and two major state-based agrarian civilizations. Most of the population of the Americas was concentrated in those two societies—the Aztec and Inca empires (see Map 13.5, p. 589). Since neither had an extensive literary tradition, historians seeking to understand their history and culture have depended heavily on the records and observations of the Spanish who conquered them in the sixteenth century. This raises obvious questions about the credibility of such accounts. Can writers from a conquering power and a completely different culture accurately describe the life and history of those they have recently defeated? At least some of those Spanish observers were able to draw on the local knowledge and experience of native peoples. What follows are accounts of the Aztec and Inca empires as seen through the eyes of two remarkable Spanish observers, both of whom at least tried to understand the people of these American civilizations.

Document 13.1

Diego Duran on the Aztecs

Coming to Mexico with his family as a young boy, Diego Duran (1537–1588) subsequently became a Dominican friar, learned to speak fluently the native Nahuatl language of the Aztecs, and began a lifelong enterprise of studying their history and culture. His research often involved extensive interviewing of local people in the rural areas where he worked and resulted in three books published between 1574 and 1581. The first excerpt records a series of laws or decrees, which Duran attributes to the Aztec ruler Moctezuma I, who governed the empire between 1440 and 1469. They reveal something of the court practices and social hierarchy of the Aztec realm as the empire was establishing itself in the middle decades of the fifteenth century. The second excerpt touches on

various aspects of Aztec culture—religion, human sacrifice, social mobility, commercial markets, and slavery.

- What do Moctezuma's laws tell us about the social and moral values of the Aztecs?
- Based on these two excerpts, how would you describe Aztec society? What distinct social groups or classes can you identify? How were they distinguished from one another? What opportunities for social mobility were available? How might people fall into slavery?
- What impressed Duran about the markets operating within the Aztec Empire?
- How was human sacrifice related to war, to market activity, to slavery, and to religious belief and practice?
- Duran's accounts of Aztec life and history were written more than fifty years after the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. To what extent do you think this compromises his efforts to describe preconquest Aztec society?

King Moctezuma I

Laws, Ordinances, and Regulations

ca. 1450

The following laws were decreed:

1. The king must never appear in public except when the occasion is extremely important and unavoidable.

2. Only the king may wear a golden diadem in the city, though in war all the great lords and brave captains may wear this (but on no other occasion)....

3. Only the king and the prime minister Tlacaelel may wear sandals within the palace.... [N]oblemen are the only ones to be allowed to wear sandals in the city and no one else, also under pain of death, with the exception of men who have performed some great feat in war....

4. Only the king is to wear the final mantles of cotton brocaded with designs and threads of different colors and adorned with featherwork....

5. The great lords, who are twelve, may wear special mantles of certain make and design, and the minor lords, according to their valor and accomplishments, may wear others.

6. The common soldiers are permitted to wear only the simplest type of mantle. They are prohibited from using any special designs that might set them off from the rest....

7. The commoners will not be allowed to wear cotton clothing, under pain of death, but can use only garments of maguey fiber....

8. Only the great noblemen and valiant warriors are given license to build a house with a second story; for disobeying this law a person receives the death penalty....

9. Only the great lords are to wear labrets, ear plugs, and nose plugs of gold and precious stones, except for commoners who are strong men, brave captains, and soldiers, but their labrets, ear plugs, and nose plugs must be of bone, wood, or other inferior material of little value....

Source: Fray Diego Duran, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, translated by Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 208–10.

11. In the royal palace there are to be diverse rooms where different classes of people are to be received, and under pain of death no one is to enter that of the great lords or to mix with those men [unless of that class himself]....

12. An order of judges is to be established, beginning with the judges of the supreme council. After these would come regular court judges, municipal judges, district officials, constables, and councilmen, although none of them may give the death sentence without notifying the king. Only the sovereign can sentence someone to death or pardon him....

13. All the barrios will possess schools or monasteries for young men where they will learn religion and correct comportment. They are to do penance, lead hard lives, live with strict morality, practice for warfare, do physical work, fast, endure disciplinary measures, draw blood from different parts of the body, and keep watch at night. There are to be teachers and old men to correct them and chastise them and lead them in their exercises and take care that they are not idle, do not lose their time. All of these youth must observe chastity in the strictest way, under pain of death.

14. There is to be a rigorous law regarding adulterers. They are to be stoned and thrown into the rivers or to the buzzards.

15. Thieves will be sold for the price of their theft, unless the theft be grave, having been committed many times. Such thieves will be punished by death.

16. Great privileges and exemptions are to be given those who dedicate themselves to religion, to the temples and the gods. Priests will be awarded great distinction, reverence, and authority.

Diego Duran

Book of the Gods and Rites

1574–1576

I wish to tell of the way in which the natives sacrificed....

So ended the ceremony of the blessing of the pieces of dough in the form of the bones and the flesh of the god. They were revered and honored in the name of Huitzilopochtli with all the respectful veneration that we ourselves hold for the Divine Sacrament of the Altar. To exalt the occasion further, the sacrificers of men were also present....

Smeared with black, the six sacrificers appeared.... Seeing them come out with their ghastly aspect filled all the people with dread and terrible fear! The high priest carried in one hand a large stone knife, sharp and wide. Another carried a wooden yoke carved in the form of a snake. They humbled themselves before the idol and then stood in order next to a pointed stone, which stood in front of the door of the idol's chamber....

All the prisoners of war who were to be sacrificed upon this feast were then brought forth.... They seized the victims one by one, one by one foot, another by the other, one priest by one hand, another by the other hand. The victim was thrown on his back, upon the pointed stone, where the wretch was grabbed by the fifth priest, who placed the yoke upon his throat. The high priest then opened the chest and with amazing swiftness tore out the heart, ripping it out with his own hands. Thus steaming, the heart was lifted toward the sun, and the fumes were offered up to the sun. The priest then turned toward the idol and cast the heart in its face. After the heart had been extracted, the body was allowed to roll down the steps of the pyramid....

All the prisoners and captives of war brought from the towns we have mentioned were sacrificed in this manner, until none were left. After they had been slain and cast down, their owners—those who

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Source: Fray Diego Duran, *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*, translated by Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 90–92, 137–38, 273–76, 279, 281–82.

had captured them—retrieved the bodies. They were carried away, distributed, and eaten, in order to celebrate the feast. There were at least forty or fifty captives, depending upon the skill which the men had shown in seizing and capturing men in war....

[M]any strove, in every possible way, to lift their names on high, to obtain glory, to procure greater honors, to found lineages and titles, and [to gain] good fame for their persons. There were three established and honored ways in all the nations [for obtaining these rewards]. The first and principal path which the kings designated was soldiery—to make oneself known in war through valiant feats, to be outstanding in killing, taking prisoners, to destroy armies and squadrons, to have directed these things. These [warriors] were given great honors, rewards, weapons, and insignia which were proof of their splendid deeds and valor....

The second way in which men rose was through religion, entering the priesthood. After having served in the temples in a virtuous, penitential, and cloistered way of life, in their old age they were sent out to high and honorable posts.... They were present when the government councils were held, their opinions and advice were listened to, and they were part of the ruling boards and juntas. Without their council and opinion kings did not dare act....

The third and least glorious manner of [rising in the world] was that of becoming a merchant or trader, that of buying and selling, going forth to all the markets of the land, bartering cloth for jewels, jewels for feathers, feathers for stones, and stones for slaves, always dealing in things of importance, of renown, and of high value. These [men] strengthened their social position with their wealth.... They acquired wealth and obtained slaves to sacrifice to this their god [Quetzalcoatl]. And so they were considered among the magnates of the land, just as the valorious soldier brought sacrificial captives from war, gaining fame as a brave....

[I]n olden times there was a god of markets and fairs....

The gods of these market places threatened terrible ills and made evil omens and auguries to the neighboring villages which did not attend their market places....

The markets were so inviting, pleasurable, appealing, and gratifying to these people that great crowds attended, and still attend, them, especially during the big fairs, as is well known to all....

The markets in this land were all enclosed by walls and stood either in front of the temples of the gods or to one side. Market day in each town was considered a main feast in that town or city. And thus in that small shrine where the idol of the market stood were offered ears of corn, chili, tomatoes, fruit, and other vegetables, seeds, and breads—in sum, everything sold in the *tianguiz*....

Furthermore, a law was established by the republic prohibiting the selling of goods outside the market place. Not only were there laws and penalties connected with this, but there was a fear of the supernatural, of misfortune, and of the ire and wrath of the god of the market. No one ventured, therefore, to trade outside [the market limits]....

There were many ways of becoming a slave within the law of the Indian nations....

First, he who stole the number of pieces of cloth or ears of corn, jewels, or turkeys which the laws of the republic had determined and set a penalty for was himself sold for the same amount in order to satisfy the owner of the purloined goods....

Second, another way in which a native could become a slave was that of the gambler who risked all his possessions on the dice or in any other game which the natives played....

Third, if the father of a family had many sons and daughters and among them was one [who was] incorrigible, disobedient, shameless, dissolute, incapable of receiving counsel or advice, the law... permitted [the father] to sell him in the public market place as an example and lesson to bad sons and daughters....

Fourth, one became a slave if he borrowed valuable things, such as cloth, jewels, featherwork, and did not return them on the appointed date....

In times of famine a man and wife could agree to a way of satisfying their needs and rise from their wretched state. They could sell one another, and thus husband sold wife and wife sold husband, or they sold one of their children.

Document 13.2

Pedro de Cieza de Léon on the Incas

Like Duran, Pedro de Cieza de Léon (1520–1554), a Spanish chronicler of the Inca Empire, came to the Americas as a boy. But unlike Duran, he came alone at the age of thirteen, and he followed a very different career. For the next seventeen years Cieza took part as a soldier in a number of expeditions that established Spanish rule in various parts of South America. Along the way, he collected a great deal of information, especially about the Inca Empire, which he began to publish upon his return to Spain in 1550. Despite a very limited education, Cieza wrote a series of works that have become a major source for historians about the workings of the Inca Empire and about the Spanish conquest of that land. The selection that follows focuses on the techniques that the Inca used to govern their huge empire.

- How would you describe Cieza's posture toward the Inca Empire? What in particular did he seem to appreciate about it?
- Based on this account, what difficulties did the Inca rulers face in governing their large and diverse realm?
- What policies or practices did the Inca authorities follow in seeking to integrate their empire? How do these compare with other empires that you have studied?
- Some modern observers have described the Inca Empire as "totalitarian" or "socialist." Do such terms seem appropriate? How else might you describe the Inca state?

PEDRO DE CIEZA DE LÉON

Chronicles of the Incas

ca. 1550

The Incas had the seat of their empire in the city of Cuzco, where the laws were given and the captains set out to make war.... As soon as one of these large provinces was conquered, ten or twelve thousand of the men and their wives, or six thousand, or the number decided upon, were ordered to leave and remove themselves from it. These were transfered to another town or province of the same climate and nature as that which they left.... And they had another device to keep the natives from hating them, and this was that they never divested the natural chieftains of their power. If it so happened that one of them committed a crime or in some way deserved to be stripped of his power, it was vested in his sons or brothers, and all were ordered to obey them....

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Source: *The Incas of Pedro de Cieza de Leon*, translated by Harriet de Onis (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), 56–57, 158–60, 165–73, 177–78.

One of the things most to be envied these rulers is how well they knew to conquer such vast lands....

[T]hey entered many lands without war, and the soldiers who accompanied the Inca were ordered to do no damage or harm, robbery or violence. If there was a shortage of food in the province, he ordered supplies brought in from other regions so that those newly won to his service would not find his rule and acquaintance irksome....

In many others, where they entered by war and force of arms, they ordered that the crops and houses of the enemy be spared.... But in the end the Incas always came out victorious, and when they had vanquished the others, they did not do them further harm, but released those they had taken prisoner, if there were any, and restored the booty, and put them back in possession of their property and rule, exhorting them not to be foolish and try to compete with his royal majesty nor abandon his friendship, but to be his friends as their neighbors were. And saying this, he gave them a number of beautiful women and fine pieces of wool or gold....

They never deprived the native chieftains of their rule. They were all ordered to worship the sun as God, but they were not prohibited from observing their own religions and customs....

It is told for a fact of the rulers of this kingdom that in the days of their rule they had their representatives in the capitals of all the provinces.... They served as head of the provinces or regions, and from every so many leagues around the tributes were brought to one of these capitals, and from so many others, to another. This was so well organized that there was not a village that did not know where it was to send its tribute. In all these capitals the Incas had temples of the sun, mints, and many silversmiths who did nothing but work rich pieces of gold or fair vessels of silver.... The tribute paid by each of these districts where the capital was situated, and that turned over by the natives, whether gold, silver, clothing, arms, and all else they gave, was entered in the accounts of the [*quipu-*] *camayocs*, who kept the quipus and did everything ordered by the governor in the matter of finding the soldiers or supplying whomever the Inca ordered, or making delivery to Cuzco; but when they came from the city of Cuzco to go over the accounts, or they were ordered to go to Cuzco to give an accounting, the accountants themselves gave it by the quipus, or went to give it where there could be no fraud, but everything had to come out right. Few years went by in which an accounting of all these things was not made....

When the Incas set out to visit their kingdom, it is told that they traveled with great pomp, riding in rich litters set upon smooth, long poles of the finest wood and adorned with gold and silver....

So many people came to see his passing that all the hills and slopes seemed covered with them, and all called down blessings upon him....

He [the Inca] traveled four leagues each day, or as much as he wished; he stopped wherever he liked to inquire into the state of his kingdom; he willingly listened to those who came to him with complaints, righting wrongs and punishing those who had committed an injustice....

[T]hese rulers, as the best measure, ordered and decreed, with severe punishment for failure to obey, that all the natives of their empire should know and understand the language of Cuzco, both they and their women.... This was carried out so faithfully that in the space of a very few years a single tongue was known and used in an extension of more than 1,200 leagues; yet, even though this language was employed, they all spoke their own [languages], which were so numerous that if I were to list them it would not be credited....

[The Inca] appointed those whose duty it was to punish wrongdoers, and to this end they were always traveling about the country. The Incas took such care to see that justice was meted out that nobody ventured to commit a felony or theft. This was to deal with thieves, ravishers of women, or conspirators against the Inca; however, there were many provinces that warred on one another, and the Incas were not wholly able to prevent this.

By the river [Huatanay] that runs through Cuzco justice was executed on those who were caught or brought in as prisoners from some other place.

There they had their heads cut off, or were put to death in some other manner which they chose. Mutiny and conspiracy were severely punished, and, above all, those who were thieves and known as such; even their wives and chidren were despised and considered to be tarred with the same brush....

[I]n each of the many provinces there were many storehouses filled with supplies and other needful things; thus, in times of war, wherever the armies went they draw upon the contents of these storehouses, without ever touching the supplies of their confederates or laying a finger on what they had in their settlements. And when there was no war, all this stock of supplies and food was divided up among the poor and the widows. These poor were the aged, or the lame, crippled, or paralyzed, or those afflicted with some other diseases.... If there came a lean year, the storehouses were opened and the provinces were lent what they needed in the way of supplies; then, in a year of abundance, they paid back all they had received.

Using the Evidence: The Aztecs and the Incas through Spanish Eyes

1. **Assessing documents:** Both Duran and Cieza were outsiders to the societies they described, and they were part of the conquering Spanish forces. In what ways did these conditions affect their descriptions of the Aztec and Inca empires?
2. **Considering the subtext of documents:** In what ways might these authors have been using their observation of Aztec or Inca society to praise or to criticize their own European homeland?
3. **Evaluating the credibility of documents:** Which statements in these documents do you find most credible and which ones might you be inclined to question or challenge? What criteria might you use to assess the evidence in these documents?
4. **Relating primary documents and text narrative:** How might you use the information in these documents to support the descriptions of the Aztec and Inca empires that are contained in this chapter? Are there ways the documents might challenge statements in the text?
5. **Making comparisons:** What similarities and differences between Aztec and Inca societies can you glean from these documents?
6. **Seeking more data:** What additional primary sources about the Aztec and Inca empires of the fifteenth century would you like to have? What other perspectives on those states would be useful for historians?

Visual Sources

Considering the Evidence: Sacred Places in the World of the Fifteenth Century

Virtually every human community throughout history has designated certain places and certain structures as particularly sacred or holy, even if they understand all of creation to partake in that sacredness. Such sites represent intersections between the ordinary world and the world beyond. Many such places were private—the Chinese family altars displaying ancestral tablets and the "house churches" of early Christians, for example—but the most visible and prominent were public spaces such as shrines, cathedrals, temples, and mosques.

Sometimes the holiness of such sites derived from the burial of a highly respected figure, such as the tomb of Abraham in Israel, sacred to Jews and Muslims alike, or Lenin's tomb in Moscow, virtually a shrine to faithful communists. Particular historical or religious events, such as the birth of Jesus or the enlightenment of the Buddha, have contributed to the sacred status of structures erected in those places. Formal rites of consecration, the presence of relics, and rituals of devotion such as the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca add to the extraordinary character of particular buildings. So too did distinctive architectural styles as well as the sensory stimulus of bells, calls to prayer, and the burning of incense or candles.[20] Still other buildings acquired a sacred character because they were gathering places for prayer or worship.

Such sacred sites, however, did not function exclusively in the spiritual realm; they often operated as well in the more secular domains of commerce and politics. The New Testament records that Jesus angrily drove the money changers from the temple in Jerusalem, while Buddhist monasteries on the Silk Road and elsewhere often became wealthy centers of trade. Furthermore, sacred places played important political roles as rulers sought the blessing and support of religious leaders and the aura of legitimacy that derived from some association with the realm of the holy. State authorities and wealthy elites often patronized the construction of sacred buildings and contributed to their upkeep. Sacred sites have sometimes spawned violence as rivalries erupted among competing sects or between political and religious authorities.

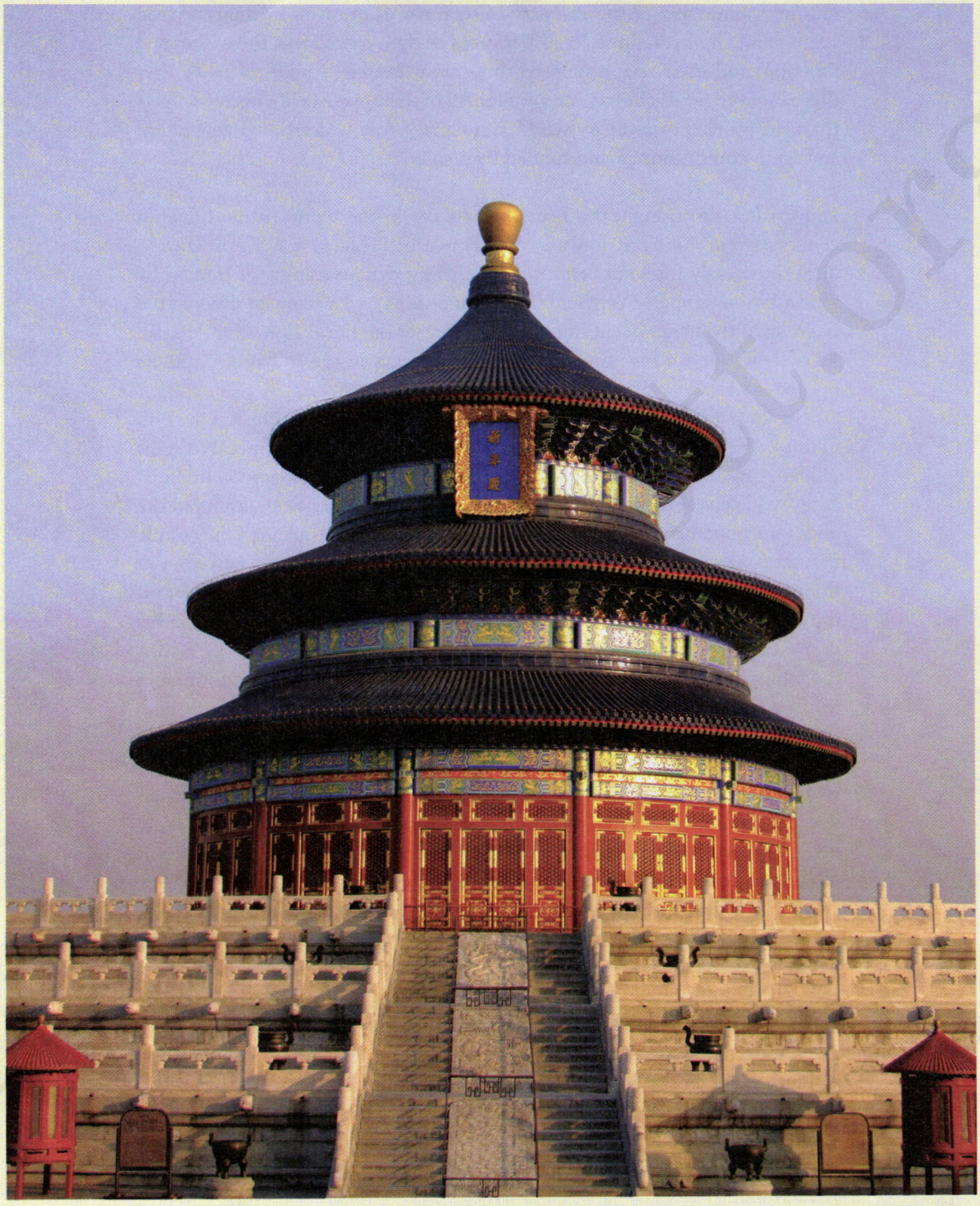
The four sacred sites shown in this section might well have been on the itinerary of an imaginary global traveler in the fifteenth century. Together they

illustrate something of the diversity of such places in terms of their physical setting and architectural styles, the sources of their sacredness, their intended function, and their relationship to those who exercised political power. Yet they also bore similarities to one another. All of them were deliberately set apart from the profane or ordinary world, were linked to a wider sacred geography, and were commissioned and funded by a ruler.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the largest sacred site in the world of the fifteenth century lay in China. Known as the Temple of Heaven, it was constructed during the early fifteenth century in the Ming dynasty capital of Beijing by the ambitious emperor Yongle (reigned 1402–1424), who likewise ordered the building of the magnificent imperial residence of the Forbidden City. (He also sent Zheng He on his immense maritime voyages in the Indian Ocean; see pp. 577–78.)

Set in a forest of more than 650 acres, the Temple of Heaven was, in Chinese thinking, the primary place where Heaven and earth met. From his residence in the Forbidden City, the Chinese emperor led a procession of thousands twice a year to this sacred site, where he offered sacrifices, implored the gods for a good harvest, and performed those rituals that maintained the cosmic balance. These sacred ceremonies, from which commoners were barred even from watching, demonstrated the emperor's respect for the age-old source of his imperial authority, the Mandate of Heaven, from which Chinese emperors derived their legitimate right to rule. As the emperor bowed to Heaven, he was modeling in good Confucian fashion the respect required of all subordinates to their social superiors and especially to the emperor himself.

The temple complex was laced with ancient symbolism. The southern part of the wall that enclosed the complex was square, symbolizing the earth, while the northern wall was rounded or semicircular, suggesting Heaven in Daoist thinking. Major buildings were likewise built in the round while being situated within a square enclosure, also symbolizing the intersection of Heaven and earth. The most prominent building was the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvest (Visual Source 13.1), constructed by 1420. There the emperor prayed and conducted rituals to ensure a successful agricultural season on which the country's well-being and his own legitimacy depended. The emperor and others approached the hall from the south on a gradually ascending 360-meter walkway symbolizing progression from earth to Heaven. The walkway divides into three parallel paths: the center one for the gods; the left for the emperor; and the right for the empress and court officials. Originally the three roofs of the structure were of different colors: the top was blue, suggesting Heaven; the middle was yellow, the color of the emperor; and the lowest was green, indicating commoners or the earth. Later all three roofs were painted blue.



Visual Source 13.1 The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvest at the Temple of Heaven, Beijing, China (AP Images)

- Which symbolic features can you identify in Visual Source 13.1?
- What did the original color scheme of the roofs suggest?
- What was the role of the emperor within the Temple of Heaven and in the larger religious or cosmological framework of Chinese thinking?
- What impressions or understandings might those who observed the ceremonies or learned about them take away from that experience?

About the same time as the Temple of Heaven was taking shape in China, another sacred site was under construction in Kyoto, Japan: a Buddhist temple known as Kinkakuji, or the "Temple of the Golden Pavilion" (Visual Source 13.2). Like the Chinese structure, Kinkakuji was a project of the Japanese ruler of the time, the *shogun* (military leader) Yoshimitsu Ashikaga (1358–1408), rather than the emperor. Unlike his Chinese counterpart, the Japanese emperor functioned more as a symbol of Japan's historical tradition rather than its effective ruler. Initially, Kinkakuji was constructed as part of a villa to which Yoshimitsu retired when he gave up his formal political role in 1394 to devote himself to Buddhist practice and the arts. After his death it was converted into a Zen Buddhist temple, as he had wished.

The building itself reflects the strong influence of Chinese culture on Japan. Yoshimitsu, well known as a lover of all things Chinese, modeled Kinkakuji on the lakeside villas of earlier Chinese emperors and collected in the Golden Pavilion thousands of Chinese paintings. He also accepted the title "King of Japan" from a Ming dynasty emperor and reopened trade relations with China.

As a Buddhist temple, Kinkakuji is situated in a garden setting at the edge of a "mirror lake," suggesting, some have said, a position between heaven and earth. The lake contained a series of rocks and small islands representing the eight oceans and nine mountains of the Buddhist creation story. Inside were statues of the Amida Buddha, the benevolent bodhisattva of compassion known as Kannon, and dozens of other sacred figures. It also became known as one of the few Buddhist temples housing relics of the historical Buddha himself.

While Buddhism has a reputation as a religion of peace and tranquillity, in Japan from the tenth century on, various Buddhist sects organized private armies, fought among themselves, and contested both imperial and samurai authorities. Kinkakuji itself was burned several times in the fifteenth century amid the wars that racked Japan and left Kyoto in ruins.

- How might you compare the purposes that Kinkakuji served with those of the Temple of Heaven?

Visual Source 13.2 Kinkakuji: A Buddhist Temple in Japan (© Craig Lovell/Corbis)

- What elements of Kinkakuji and its surroundings contribute to its sacredness?
- What emotions do you think Kinkakuji was intended to evoke?
- In what ways did Kinkakuji have a political as well as a religious significance?

In the Islamic world of the fifteenth century, the structure known as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (Visual Source 13.3) was second only to Mecca as a pilgrimage site for Muslims. When expanding Muslim forces took control of Jerusalem in 638 and subsequently constructed the Dome of the Rock (687–691), that precise location had long been regarded as sacred. To Jews, it contained the rock on which Abraham prepared to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God, and it was the site of the first two Jewish temples. To Christians, it was a place that Jesus had visited as a youngster to converse with learned teachers and later to drive out the moneychangers.

Thus, when the Umayyad caliph (successor to the prophet) Abd al-Malik ordered the construction of the Dome of the Rock on that site, he was appro-

priating for Islam both Jewish and Christian legacies. But he was also demonstrating the victorious arrival of a new faith and announcing to Christians that "the Islamic state was here to stay."[21] The architecture and decoration of the Dome of the Rock drew heavily on Roman, Byzantine, and Persian precedents as if to show that "'unbelievers' had been defeated and brought into the fold of the true faith."[22] The domed rotunda had long been used in the Christian Byzantine Empire to denote holy sites, often the burial place of a martyr, saint, or prophet. The Muslim structure, designed and built by Christian architects and artisans, closely resembled the nearby Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Interior decorations featured crowns, jewels, breastplates, and flowers of Persian origins.

Nonetheless, the Dome of the Rock was distinctly Islamic, as its many mosaics lacked any representations of animals or humans, while multiple inscriptions from the Quran emphasized Islamic monotheism, presenting Jesus as an honored prophet but not as the divine son of God. Furthermore, the Dome of the Rock was soon thought to cover the stone from which Muhammad had made his famous Night Journey into the presence of God as suggested

Visual Source 13.3 The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem (© Aaron Horowitz/Corbis)

in the Quran and embellished in popular mythology. Some claimed to see an indentation in that stone, which lies uncovered in the center of the dome, as the footprint of the prophet himself.

Over many centuries, and even to the present, the Dome of the Rock has been an enormously contested site. When Christian crusaders seized Jerusalem in 1099, they did not destroy the Muslim shrine but converted it into a Christian sacred place—the Temple of the Lord—and erected a huge golden cross on its dome. Likewise, when Muslim forces retook Jerusalem in 1187, they removed that cross, replaced it with a Muslim crescent, and then cleansed the Dome of the Rock three times with rose water. In the fifteenth century, the Dome was under the control and protection of a Turkic dynasty, known as Mamluks, based in Egypt. In 1517 it fell within the domains of the Ottoman Empire.

- The Dome of the Rock was never intended as a mosque for regular worship but rather as a pilgrimage site. How might you imagine the reaction of a Muslim pilgrim encountering it for the first time during the fifteenth century? How would that pilgrim's place of origin (Arabia, Africa, India, or Europe, for example) have made a difference in how he or she responded to it?
- What contributed to the sacred character of the Dome of the Rock?
- How might you compare the intended purpose of the Dome of the Rock to that of the Temple of Heaven in China?
- You might do a little research on the current disputes about the Dome of the Rock. What role does it play in the contemporary Israeli/Palestinian conflict?

In seeking sacred sites within the Christian world of the fifteenth century, our imaginary global traveler would have had a wide range of choices. He or she might well have visited one of the many Renaissance cathedrals of Italy or chosen from among the dozens of impressive Christian churches scattered across Europe. The newly reconstructed Kremlin in Moscow might also have been of interest, for in that fortified enclosure lay an elaborate palace for Grand Prince Ivan III as well as a number of churches, demonstrating the close relationship of religious and political authority in the emerging Russian state. But in the highlands of Ethiopia, amid some of the most remarkable Christian architecture of the time, the rock churches of Lalibela provide a useful reminder that the Christian world of the fifteenth century was not limited to Europe.

With its origins in the ancient civilization of Axum well before the birth of Christ, Ethiopia by the fifteenth century had hosted a Christian culture for more than a thousand years. By then, the center of that civilization had moved southward to the region later known as Lalibela. There, in the twelfth

Visual Source 13.4 The Church of St. George, Lalibela, Ethiopia (Heltler/Robert Harding World Imagery/Corbis)

century, a local prince had seized the throne and initiated the Zagwe dynasty. Zagwe rulers, in particular King Lalibela (ruled early thirteenth century), for whom the region was subsequently named, sponsored the creation of eleven remarkable underground churches, carved from the soft volcanic rock of the region. This enormous and sacred project served to legitimate the rule of these upstart Zagwe monarchs over this ancient Christian kingdom and provided an alternative to the older political and religious center of Ethiopian civilization in Axum to the north.

A further motivation for the construction of these churches lay perhaps in Ethiopia's long relationship with Jerusalem. Ancient stories linked its monarchy to the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, said to be an Ethiopian monarch. Local legends held that King Lalibela had been mysteriously transported to Jerusalem, where he received divine instructions about building the churches. Certainly, Ethiopian Christians had long made pilgrimages to the Holy City. When Muslim forces reconquered Jerusalem from the Christian crusaders in 1187, Ethiopia's Zagwe monarchs apparently determined to create a New Jerusalem in their kingdom. The churches of Lalibela, many of them named for famous sites in Jerusalem, were the outcome of that project.

Thus, while the Dome of the Rock physically occupied an already sacred site in Jerusalem, the rock churches of Lalibela sought to symbolically re-create the Holy City in the highlands of Ethiopia. They have been both a monastic site and a pilgrimage destination ever since.

These belowground churches represent an enormously impressive architectural achievement, said by local people to have been assisted by angels. But well before the coming of Christianity, the local Agaw-speaking people had long incorporated rock shrines into their religious practice. And the architecture of the churches shows a clear connection to earlier Axumite styles.

While this sacred site clearly had indigenous roots, these churches were certainly distinctive as Christian structures. Unlike almost all other religious architecture—Christian or otherwise—they were virtually invisible from a distance, becoming apparent only when the observer was looking down on them from ground level. In fact these eleven churches were not really constructed at all, but rather excavated, using only hammers and chisels. Underground, they were connected to one another by a series of "hidden tunnels, dark twisting passages, and secret chambers," while the whole complex abounded with "columns and arches, shafts and galleries, courts and terraces."[23] The first European observer to see them, the Portuguese priest Francisco Alvarez in the 1520s, was stunned. "I weary of writing more about these buildings," he declared, "because it seems to me that I shall not be believed if I write more."[24] Visual Source 13.4 shows one of these structures, the Church of St. George, the patron saint of Ethiopia.

- How might our imaginary traveler, a pilgrim who had toured the grand Christian cathedrals of Europe, have responded to these Ethiopian churches? How might he or she understand their belowground construction? What might strike such a traveler as distinctive about Lalibela as a sacred site in comparison to the others presented here?
- What do these churches disclose about the outlook of the Zagwe monarchs who ordered their creation?
- What might you infer about the labor and social organization required to create these churches?

Using the Evidence: Sacred Places in the World of the Fifteenth Century

1. **Comparing experiences of the sacred:** What do these visual sources and the documents for this chapter (see pp. 601–07) suggest about the experience of the sacred? What common features and what differences

characterize that experience? In particular, how might our global traveler have responded to sacred places among the Aztecs after visiting the various sites shown here?

2. **Considering the construction of the sacred:** What historical circumstances and what motivations contributed to the creation of each site? What factors rendered them holy in the eyes of believers? What evidence of cultural borrowing can you see in these sites?
3. **Defining purpose:** How would you compare the purposes for which each of these sacred places was intended?
4. **Thinking about religion and politics:** In what ways were these sacred sites embedded in the political circumstances of their societies? How might people of the fifteenth century have understood the connection between the religious and the political as evidenced in these images? To what extent did those understandings differ from more modern views?